



McLellan, J. (2015). The 'Problem of Women' in Post-War Europe. *English Historical Review*, 130(545), 934-944.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cev187>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1093/ehr/cev187](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cev187)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article/130/545/934/534403> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

## The 'problem of women' in postwar Europe

Josie McLellan, University of Bristol

*Women's Activism. Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova (London and New York: Routledge, 2013; pp. xi+201).

*Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France*, by Rebecca J. Pulju (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; xiv+260).

*Women and Gender in Postwar Europe. From Cold War to European Union*, edited by Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2012, xi+243).

In 1947, the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women met for the first time, in the inauspicious surroundings of a former aeroplane factory in Long Island. Amid the chaos of the postwar world, delegates began to discuss how women might be granted equal rights. Unsurprisingly, their annual meetings were not untouched by Cold War rhetoric and ideological rivalry. Many participants were eager to underline their own countries' particular contribution to the elevation of women's status. Eliziveta Popova, the Soviet delegate, urged her colleagues: 'If one looks at the situation of women in the world at large, one sees that in some countries, such as mine, the problem usually called "the problem of women" has been finally solved. From the moment the Soviet Authority was established, women have enjoyed all rights, with complete equality.'<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to spot the ideological nature of such statements, nor to contrast them with the persistent issues of gender inequality within the Soviet Union. Questions about the status of women have become central and indispensable for historians of modern Europe. It is difficult to imagine a synthesis of the First World War, the Third Reich, or the Stalin-era Soviet Union with any social history aspirations which did not devote a substantial section to the experiences of women and girls. However, while historians have become skilled at diagnosing the 'problem of women' in past societies, it can be more difficult to recognize when it occurs closer to home. As we move closer to the present day, and particularly past 1945, 'the problem usually called "the problem of women"' fades out of focus. Was the experience of women in the postwar period less distinctive than during the First World War or in Nazi Germany? Is this a period where the traditional categories of women's history, and even gender, are less relevant? Our understanding of the postwar period is often driven by the common sense assumption that that women have taken – or are in the process of taking – their place in society. These were years when women cast off the fetters of prejudice and discrimination and were – after a short struggle – able to take their place at the table. This is an essentially teleological narrative in which

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Lambertz, "'Democracy could go no further': Europe and women in the early United Nations" in Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith (eds.), *Women and Gender in Postwar Europe. From Cold War to European Union* (Routledge: London and New York, 2012), 38.

women move (with various degrees of smoothness) towards 'normality', involving control over family size, participation in paid employment, representation in government, and financial independence.

Yet there are a number of significant problems with this narrative and the assumptions it makes. Firstly, it is highly Whiggish, setting up the current state of (Western) European gender relations – equality or as near as dammit – as the end point of thousands of years of historical change. By and large, it suggests, we in the West are now 'over' the problem of women.<sup>2</sup> Remaining tensions around sexual difference are smoothed over as the residual traces of an almost-complete transition. But the differences in men's and women's lives are persistent. Women are more likely to work part-time and earn less than men for equivalent work. Men are overrepresented in leadership positions in politics, governance, and the economy. The availability of birth control has revolutionized women's lives, but it cannot be said to have made them identical to men's, in the reproductive sphere at least. (It is estimated that around 40% of pregnancies in high income countries are unplanned.<sup>3</sup>) Rising rates of births outside marriage have had different consequences for men and women (in Germany in 2011, fathers made up only 9.9% of single-parent households).<sup>4</sup> It seems ahistorical to dismiss these persistently gendered patterns as a transitional phase unworthy of serious attention. Yet the impulse to write that 'women are *still* more likely to work part time' is a strong one – as if the movement towards universal female full time work is inevitable but delayed. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that the history of postwar women is not a straightforward one of the casting-off of restrictions, but a more interesting and complicated story altogether, riven with 'contradictions, which defy any notion of linear progress or naïve optimism'.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise we risk seeing our gender order as natural – or nearing a natural state – in a very similar way to our historical subjects.

One complicated and little-acknowledged part of this story is the changes in men's lives. If women were moving towards a male norm, they were aiming for a moving target. The postwar years saw astonishing transformations in men's lives: our failure to grasp this is a second problem with the teleological narrative of women in the postwar period. Some of these changes, to be sure, took place in reaction to women's shifting roles. Without wanting to evoke weary clichés of the 'battle of the sexes', it is undeniable that changes in women's lives have led to increased competition for resources including money, authority, jobs, physical

---

<sup>2</sup> On the phenomenon of 'overing', see Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included. On Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke UP, 2012), 179-180.

<sup>3</sup> PD Blumenthal et al, 'Strategies to prevent unintended pregnancy: increasing use of long-acting reversible contraception', *Human Reproduction Update* 17 (1) (2011), 121-137. A recent UK study found that 55% of pregnancies were planned. Kaye Wellings et al, 'The prevalence of unplanned pregnancy and associated factors in Britain: findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3)', *The Lancet* Vol. 382, No. 9907, 30 November 2013. 1807–1816.

<sup>4</sup> Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 'Alleinerziehende', 24.10.2012.  
<http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61581/alleinerziehende>

<sup>5</sup> Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Purvis and Krassimira Daskalova, 'Introduction' in de Haan et al, *Women's Activism. Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

control, education, affection, and time. Such conflicts of course are not only gendered, but involve issues of class, ethnicity, geography and nationality. In large part, though, changes in men's lives have been a result of the changing nature of the global economy. The rise of the service sector, mass consumption, the global labour market, the collapse of manufacturing, the demise of the family wage: all have impacted upon men's working lives, financial situation, and self-understanding in ways that we have yet to fully understand.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, accounts of women's progress dodge the question of causality. The relationship between the socio-economic changes of the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of the women's movement, and changes in women's employment and reproductive patterns are rarely interrogated. Were the rise in female employment and the women's movement manifestations of the same pulse of social change? Were the causes of women's emancipation cultural, economic, or political? If the latter, was change driven from above (reforming legislatures) or below (the women's movement)?<sup>7</sup> How do we make sense of the similarities between countries with a strong women's movement and those where activism was less significant? What meaningful comparisons be drawn between Eastern and Western Europe?

The problem of women, therefore, raises a number of intriguing questions that are central to understanding the postwar period. What were the interconnections between social, economic, and political change? What motivated people to behave in ways that were different to earlier generations? How did (welfare) states and political settlements that were built on a historically contingent postwar moment adapt to fundamental changes in its nature? Postwar Europe was built on a particular gender order – which has now collapsed. What are the implications of this for the history of the 1970s and beyond, not only for historians of women (and men *qua* men) but for the histories of the welfare state, education, the economy, politics, and leisure? Three recent books offer some clues.

*Women and Gender in Postwar Europe*, edited by Joanna Regulska and Bonnie G. Smith, collects twelve essays, ranging from Michal Shapira on Donald Winnicott's postwar BBC broadcasts on motherhood to Arturas Tereskinas' analysis of 'wounded' masculinities in present day Lithuania. As these articles suggest, the book's scope is ambitious: thematically, chronologically and geographically. A number of essays bring novel and important work to a non-specialist audience, e.g. Young-Sun Hong on Korean nurses in Germany, and Darja Zaviršek on social

---

<sup>6</sup> A good model for setting changes in men's and women's lives alongside each other (albeit largely for an earlier period) is Ann Goldberg, 'Women and Men: 1760-1960' in Helmut Walser Smith (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History* (OUP, 2011), 71-87.

<sup>7</sup> Geoff Eley offers a subtle analysis which combines political and economic change: '[B]y the 1980s feminism had not "transformed society", but the utopianism of Women's Liberation – "its wild wish" – had redefined "the scope and conceptualization of what is politics". As politics moved right, this changing of categories happened increasingly in the private zones – in personal relationships, in small groups, in alternative spaces, and in fashioning new cultures, away from the main thoroughfares of party and state, although still shaped and enabled by larger structural changes in employment, social politics, education, public health, family organization, and popular culture much as before.' Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (OUP, 2002), 381.

work in Slovenia. What is more, rather than simply offering a broad range of case studies, the book also aspires to offer an overview. Fransisca de Haan's excellent article on women's work in Eastern and Western Europe fulfills this function beautifully. While the book excels in providing variety, there is at times an element of confusion, as the book attempts to both offer an overview for an undergraduate audience, and showcase specialist research. There are excellent examples of both to be found, but in some cases the article titles promise the former, only to deliver the latter.

Francisca de Haan, Margaret Allen, June Pruvis and Krassimira Daskalova's volume, *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, profits from a very coherent conceptual framework, set out by the editors in their excellent introduction. Three main contentions lie at the heart of this project: the global interconnectedness of women's activism for social justice, the need to set aside a single-minded focus on gender as a category of analysis, and the urgency of de-centring Eurocentric perspectives. All three of these contentions push back against a view of women's political awareness as a Western phenomenon which subsequently trickled down or was imposed upon the developing world. So, for example Patricia van der Spuy and Lindsay Clowes explore the impact of the visit of Sarojini Naidu (a member of the Indian National Congress) to South Africa in 1924, pointing in particular to Cissie Gool, who acted as Naidu's host and later became a prominent political activist in her own right. Kiyoko Yamaguchi describes the emergence of the grassroots 'housewives-lib' movement in 1970s and 1980s Japan, and Victoria Haskins explores the interactions between Chinese-Australian women and their Aboriginal domestic servants in the early part of the twentieth century. Other contributions, notably Glenda Sluga's superb chapter on the early UN, contribute to an exciting body of new research on women and internationalism.<sup>8</sup>

De Haan et al foreground the concept of 'intersectionality' as a means of exploring the complicated nature of female identity. First used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term intersectionality draws attention to the ways in which gender identity intersected and interacted with other identities such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> It has been used to draw attention to the standpoints of black and ethnic minority, transgender, disabled, working class and non-Western women, demonstrating that multiple identities not only co-exist, but also inflect and shape each other. That is, to be a black woman is more than the sum of being a woman and being black: the intersection of these two identities creates a new and particular experience. The global focus of De Haan et al's collection throws the differences between women, and the problems of using 'gender' as a single category of analysis, into sharp relief. As Sluga puts it:

---

<sup>8</sup> See for example Celia Donert, 'Women's Rights in Cold War Europe: Disentangling Feminist Histories', *Past and Present*, supplement 8 (2013), 178-202; Celia Donert and Janou Glencross, 'Gendering Universalisms in International History', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, online edition, 8 (2011), H. 3, URL: <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Donert-Glencross-3-2011>; Carola Sachse and Atina Grossmann, 'Human Rights, Utopias, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Europe. Introduction', *Central European History* 44 (2011), 1-12.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins. Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 1991, 1241-1299.

'There was no shared 'women's view' on global interests in the immediate post-war era, just as there was no global consensus on women's rights.' (54) Chiara Bonfiglioli's article on left-wing women in Italy and Yugoslavia in the early postwar period shows not only the way in which such ideological allegiances created transnational allegiances across the Cold War divide, but also the difficulties faced by those who sought to foreground gender in existing political narratives, such as antifascism. Women activists – let alone women as a whole – were divided along multiple lines, not least ideological ones.

Rebecca Pulju's *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* addresses the tensions between the expectations raised by women's enfranchisement and the demands of social and economic reconstruction. What sort of role might French women play in a postwar society where gender hierarchies were being quickly reasserted? 'It's incredible', wrote an exasperated journalist, 'that women, who were so brave, so decisive, so chic during the war, capitulate before the mocking smile of an imbecile!' (37) One way out of this dilemma was to refigure consumption as an economic act. As French society came to terms with both rapidly rising living standards and women's changing role, the figure of the citizen consumer allowed cautious recognition of women's claim to an increased stake in society, while holding tight to comforting certainties about gender. '[T]he desire for "normalcy", the recognition that women had become full citizens, the drive for reconstruction and productivity, and the belief that consumer decisions drove the postwar economy, all made consumer citizenship an attractive construct at this moment.' (18) Pulju does not claim to be the first scholar to point out the phenomenon of housewife as an economic stakeholder.<sup>10</sup> But a number of things make this a fascinating and significant book.

Firstly, Pulju draws our attention to the ways this process played out in the French countryside. Rural women were as keen to access the material advantages of the postwar period as city-dwellers. As early as 1952, groups of 5-10 families in the Maine-et-Loire region clubbed together to buy a shared washing machine, which had to be rolled from farm to farm – or even carried across the fields. (171) Social scientists saw women as the 'secret agents of modernity': rural women were keen to mechanise both farm and home, in a quest for increased leisure time and a 'modern' home. Secondly, Pulju points out that contemporaries had a keen awareness of the economic value of housework. Women's organisations and social scientists quantified both the hours spent working in the home, and the notional costs of replacing them. 'The most important French industry, in terms of the quantity of work expended, is the industry of housework', concluded the magazine *Productivité française* (69-70). As Pulju astutely points out, this discourse 'both celebrated and infantilized housewives' (61), including them in the national economic effort, but leaving them open to unlimited quantities of advice on how to become more productive yet. Indeed, the 'citizen consumer' proved to be a very short lived solution to the problem of women. As early as the 1960s, women were starting to question the

---

<sup>10</sup> See particularly here Erica Carter's pioneering work, *How German Is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

assumption that consumption and homemaking alone could provide emancipation. The tensions inherent in the postwar settlement were beginning to come to the surface.

The books under review suggest that there is much still to be learned about the 'problem of women'. Yet taken as a whole, this literature also reveals a number of yet-to-be resolved problems and challenges. Most strikingly, there is a mismatch between the urgency and importance of these historians' questions and the tentative nature of many conclusions. Again and again, an essay ends by stressing the ambiguities, contradictions, and complexity of women's lives. The de-essentialising of female experience, the point that one woman's meat was another's poison, is important. But it is frustrating to find that so many shy away from broader conclusions, and few attempt to explain what difference these findings might make to our understanding of the postwar period as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Why, more than four decades after the arrival of women's history as a field of study, is this not a more bullish field? The answer, I would argue, lies with three significant and unresolved methodological challenges.

Firstly, we face the problem of 'women' as a category of analysis. Historians are now rightly wary of generalizations about women's experience across social, ethnic, geographic, or political divisions. Many of the scholars in these volumes take great pains to emphasize the particularity of the particular groups of women they study, and the things that distinguished and separated them from other women. Where does this leave the history of women? Should we conclude that analysis is impossible beyond the level of the individual? The term intersectionality was coined to draw attention to structural problems, not to privatize them. It challenges an analysis that rests solely on gender by drawing attention to other means of signifying and distributing power, thereby drawing attention to the interplay and intersection of gender, class, ethnic, and other identities. This certainly problematizes and complicates the categories of 'women' and 'gender', but does not abolish them, any more than it abolishes class or ethnicity. In fact, it could be argued that this challenge is precisely what is required to give the history of women some analytical bite. As Joan Scott puts it: 'It's not just that women have different kinds of possibilities in their lives, but that "women" is something different in each of these moments.'<sup>12</sup>

The second problem is the problem of men. While the caveats about generalization and intersectionality apply to men's experience as much as women's, there is nevertheless a great deal to be learned about men's changing lives in the postwar period. Where did norms of masculinity change the fastest, and why? What was the impact on men of changing patterns of employment,

---

<sup>11</sup> 'If we retreat into detailed histories valued for their specificity alone we might find a safe harbor in terms of knowledge claims and attention to difference, but we will have rendered women's and gender history innocuous within the discipline and irrelevant to the political imperatives of feminism.' Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 154.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Scott, 'Unanswered Questions', *American Historical Review* 113 (5) (December 2008), 1422-30, here 1426.

particularly the collapse of the male breadwinner model? How did fathers and sons negotiate the dynamic between generations with very different lives? We may think we know the answers to these questions in a common sense way, but very little sustained scholarly work has been carried out in this field. This is a fascinating subject in its own right, of course. But it is also essential for a full understanding of the history of women. Men's and women's lives stood, for the most part, in a dialectical relationship to each other. It is impossible to understand why women continue to do more unpaid domestic work without understanding the barriers (practical, cultural and psychological) to men doing more. We cannot fully comprehend the dynamics of women's experience in the paid workforce without knowing more about the history of men at work. Nor can the issue of domestic violence – endemic across this period – be understood solely from the perspective of its victims and activist groups. In short, the history of gender norms in this period is in large part the history of a struggle for power and resources, which cannot be told from one side alone.

The final problem faced by women's history is the problem of feminism, both as an object of historical study and as a present political practice. This is an exciting moment for the history of the women's movement. Feminism was arguably the most significant social movement of the postwar Western world. It has finally begun to attract a large and vibrant community of historians. But writing the history of feminism as a political movement is not without its challenges, as historians tread a narrow path between fault-finding and hagiography. Jan Lambertz's essay on women in the early United Nations raises important questions of significance and impact, refusing to overstate the importance of the 'peripheral' Commission on the Status of Women.<sup>13</sup> One unspoken issue here is the connection between historical and political practice. The scholarship on the women's movement – like the recent history of women more generally – often has an unclarified relationship to feminism. Unlike in other disciplines, in both the humanities and social sciences, historians are generally wary about nailing their political colours to the mast. It is rare for a historian to declare him- or herself as a 'feminist scholar' in print – although many may understand themselves and their work in this way. Why and 'for whom' do we write the history of women?<sup>14</sup> As part of an ongoing struggle for equal rights and representation? Or because it is essential to an understanding of the history of politics, society, and the family? The questions are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Nor is there a right answer. But engaging with them head-on might encourage a more lively and purposeful debate.

The problem of women, then, is far from resolved. The emancipatory narrative that informs our understanding of the period is unsatisfactory. Yet so too is a historiography that stresses difference to the point of fragmentation. One way out of this impasse could be a reengagement with more explicit structural and conceptual frameworks. For example, Nancy Fraser's recent work has proposed 'three analytically distinct dimensions of gender injustice: economic, cultural,

---

<sup>13</sup> Lambertz, "'Democracy could go no further'", 37.

<sup>14</sup> See Bennett, *History Matters*, chapter 8, 'Conclusion: For Whom Are We Doing Feminist History?'



and political'.<sup>15</sup> These dimensions are related of course – the differential between male and female pay cannot be understood without considering the ways in which some kinds of work are culturally coded as 'female'. But equally, it is possible for a society to undergo a 'cultural revolution' in gender values, without a corresponding change in economic structures and political institutions.<sup>16</sup> There could be several advantages to adopting a model such as Fraser's. It would involve making clear what exactly we are talking about when we talk about women and gender. It would make conflict and competition over resources a more central question, not just in relation to gender, but with regard to class and ethnicity too. It would encourage us to clarify our thinking about the relationship between material and cultural factors (and by extension the relationship of social and cultural history). Importantly, Fraser's framework takes as its starting point – and is designed to critique – capitalist societies. Yet the gender norms she sets out to historicise (e.g. the privileging of paid work over unpaid, domestic and care work) are by no means exclusive to capitalism. Historical research has much to offer here in terms of explaining the similarities and differences between societies with different economic regimes. None of these societies truly resolved the 'problem of women': why this is the case remains to be explained.

---

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Fraser, *The Fortunes of Feminism: From Women's Liberation to Identity Politics to Anti-Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2013), 211.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 210.